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**EVIDENCE BASED POLICY MAKING: USABILITY OF THE EUROSTAT ADULT
EDUCATION SURVEY**
ABSTRACT

This paper reflects on European education policy which is driven by benchmarks and indicators. While the European benchmark on adult lifelong learning participation – 15 percent to be achieved by 2020 – is measured by the Labour Force Survey, the Eurostat Adult Education Survey was designed to better understand the topic of adult lifelong learning participation in-depth. This paper explores the Adult Education Survey as an instrument to inform policy makers and whether it provides adequate information to empirically testify participation hypotheses. The paper argues that analysis of the Adult Education Survey provides limited understanding of the educational supply side. Furthermore, policy makers should be aware of methodological and conceptual weaknesses before relying on these data in their policy development.

KEYWORDS: benchmarks, indicators, surveys, governance by numbers, comparative policy

INTRODUCTION

This paper sets out the strengths and weaknesses of using the Eurostat Adult Education Survey as a ‘new technology’ in order to trigger policy makers to adapt and adjust their national policy making towards European norms and values (Ioannidou, 2007). The European Union is a supranational organisation that does not have any legislative power in the field of education, but by funding surveys and measuring specific educational indicators, the Union is able to set priorities for the European educational policy agenda, and to put peer pressure on countries in order to achieve the common European objectives. Examples of influencing national policies by comparative data include the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA – although organised by OECD / Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) which has been a clear reference point for reforming the educational system in certain countries – e.g. by copying and transferring good practices of well-performing countries (Grek, 2009).

Adult learning systems vary across European countries as well as the extent to which adults participate in these systems (Robert, 2012). The European Union’s overarching lifelong learning policy – lifelong learning defined as learning from cradle to grave – mainly starts from the human capital theory in which competencies and qualifications are seen as tools to boost economic competitiveness. Survey instruments, such as the Eurostat Adult Education Survey which gathers comparative educational data relating to participation in adult learning activities – adults defined as those between age 25 and 64 –, become a strong reference point in creating national policies aimed at boosting knowledge and skills – and thus the economy – within a transnational context. In fact, these data are meant to control and shape the actions to be undertaken by policy makers in order to let their country perform better as poor performing countries will feel pressed to adjust and adapt their policies (Ioannidou, 2007). Although social inclusion and citizenship are known to be included in lifelong learning discourses, the economic discourse of Europe is rather dominant (Holford & Mohorcic-Spolar, 2012).

In this paper, I start by explaining Europe’s ‘governance by numbers’ approach and I reflect on benchmarks and indicators as policy instruments in-depth. Afterwards, I provide details on the

Eurostat Adult Education Survey and I focus on the usability as well as the weaknesses of relying on comparative empirical data as a tool to ‘fabricate’ a European educational space (Ozga, 2012).

The general research question to be answered in this paper is: *What are the main strengths and weaknesses of working with the Eurostat Adult Education Survey as a tool for evidence based policy making?*

Issues arising in and influencing the results of comparative research include conceptual, linguistic and measurement (lack of) equivalences and sampling issues (Osborn, 2004). Nevertheless, it will be argued that exploration of the Eurostat Adult Education Survey will – although only partially – increase the understanding of participation in adult learning, which will provide countries with a batch of comparative information available for ‘translation’ in their own national policies.

EUROPEAN POLICY ON BENCHMARKS AND INDICATORS

Policy background

After signing the Lisbon Treaty in March 2000, policy monitoring became one of the key principles in Europe’s so-called ‘Open Method of Coordination’ (OMC), based on mutual learning as well as the transfer of best practices across Member States (Holford & Mohorcic-Spolar, 2012). Although it was the OECD that had a record of working with educational indicators, the European Union adopted this approach of monitoring towards common European benchmarks and indicators with the aim to shape education policy, both in the sense of policy development and policy reform, based on data gathered within e.g. surveys like the Adult Education Survey (Ioannidou, 2007).

While education policy remains a core responsibility of the member states, Europe’s policy mechanism can be best described as putting peer pressure on member states by continuously monitoring and evaluating the progress towards specific ‘benchmarks and indicators’, and by making these performances visible for everyone. Instead of hard regulation, the OMC is seen as a soft power instrument based on ‘governance by numbers’. As the European Union lacks legislative power in the domain of education, it has to use ‘the power of knowledge’ by informing countries on their performances compared to others: Ozga (2012) defines governing as:

‘... a continuous process of managing tensions between centralised and decentralised levels of governance, deregulation and existing or new (re-)regulatory instruments of governance within nation-states and between the pressures for European and global convergence and embedded national practices and priorities.’ (Ozga, 2012, p.442).

Surveys count as ‘new technology instruments’ in order to shape policy, and thus create a ‘governing by numbers’ approach.

The overarching emphasis of the European lifelong learning policy is on educational achievement and attainment with the aim to build economic prosperity (Grek & Ozga, 2008). Data are meant to act as ‘self-regulating’ tools with education systems and individuals trying to conform towards norms agreed in the form of benchmarks and indicators, based on ‘consensus, shared values and knowledge’ (Ioannidou, 2007). These benchmarks and indicators can be defined as Europe’s ‘new governance instruments’ (Ioannidou, 2007).

Benchmarks are overall performance targets or ‘points of reference’ Europe wants to assess itself towards while indicators are concrete instruments used to monitor progress. The entire process of creating and evaluating benchmarks and indicators usually follows four steps:

'... first the Council of Ministers agrees on general guidelines and policy goals; second, member states translate the guidelines into national and regional policies; third, specific benchmarks and indicators are developed and agreed upon in order to monitor progress and to measure best practice; and, finally, in the fourth stage, results towards the realization of the common goals are evaluated on the basis of the agreed indicators and benchmarks.' (Ioannidou, 2007, p.342)

Of course, not only adult learning participation gets monitored. In 2009, Europe set up five core benchmarks to be achieved by 2020 as part of the updated 'strategic framework' in order to strive towards becoming 'the most competitive knowledge based society' (European Commission, 2010). Benchmarks remained important in order to increase employability and the quality of jobs. The 2009 benchmarks are in continuity with the previous benchmarks as adopted by the Council in 2003. As an alarming picture emerged within the 2004 Kok report – a group set up by international experts – which described the OMC as ineffective, an updated framework on benchmarks and indicators was produced in 2009 (European Commission, 2009). As the original benchmarks and indicators did not match with progress made in national policies, a mid-term review of the Lisbon Strategy became an urgent need.

The five current benchmarks – to be achieved by 2020 – are:

- at least 95% of children between 4 years old and the age for starting compulsory primary education should participate in early childhood education;
- the share of early leavers from education and training should be less than 10%;
- the share of low-achieving 15-years olds in reading, mathematics and science should be less than 15%;
- the share of 30-34 year olds with tertiary educational attainment should be at least 40%;
- an average of at least 15 % of adults should participate in lifelong learning.

These five benchmarks are accompanied by 16 concrete core indicators on which the Commission collects data in order to monitor the progression. The 16 indicators are: Participation in pre-school education, Special needs education, Early school leavers, Literacy in reading, mathematics and Science, Language skills, ICT skills, Civic skills, Learning to learn skills, Upper secondary completion rates of young people, Professional development of teachers and trainers, Higher education graduates, Cross-national mobility of students in higher education, Participation of adults in lifelong learning, Adult skills, Educational attainment of the population, Investment in education and training (European Commission, 2010).

Related to adult learning, in 2000 at the time of signing the Lisbon Treaty, the benchmark for participation in adult learning – adults between age 25 and 64 – was set at 12.5 percent to be achieved by 2010. A renewal of the benchmarks and indicators in 2009 sharpened the target towards 15 percent to be achieved by 2020, as participation in adult learning is seen as one of the core 'engines' for competitiveness and social cohesion. Currently, a lot of European countries did not yet succeed in achieving this benchmark and generally, one will find a strong 'north to south' and 'west to east' pattern: Scandinavian countries score higher than Mediterranean countries and Anglo-Celtic and Continental countries score higher than Eastern 'catching up' countries (Holford et al., 2008; Boateng, 2009). Clustering countries based on participation rates in adult/lifelong learning shows clear similarities with existing typologies and welfare state regimes (Esping-Andersen, 1989; Desmedt et al., 2006).

The European Commission produces annual reports in which the progression towards the participation benchmark gets monitored. Results in these reports indicate which countries have achieved the participation benchmark, but also shows whether countries are making progress or not. These types of graphs will put pressure on policy makers in countries like Belgium, Hungary and Slovakia, as they did not succeed yet in meeting the targets, and they lack progress.

The importance of the ‘adult lifelong learning participation’ benchmark is additionally underlined in the Europe 2020 strategy’s ‘New Skills and Jobs’ flagship action, which focuses on the continuous need of updating and renewing skills in the rapidly changing knowledge society (European Commission, 2010). Europe 2020 emerged after the break-out of the economic and financial crisis and the growing unemployment which has put pressure on social cohesion and the willingness to reduce poverty. Around 80 million adults in the European Union have poor basic skills and the skill level of the population does not match with the demands of the labour market (European Commission, 2010). Therefore, reaching the benchmark of 15 percent of adults participating in learning activities is essential in order to strive towards *smart, sustainable and inclusive growth* (European Commission, 2010).

Reporting on benchmarks and indicators

Europe started producing specific reports about these benchmarks and indicators around 2003/2004 in order to monitor the progress towards the Lisbon indicators as it became clear that achieving the targets by 2010 would probably fail (European Commission, 2004). The report stresses the aim to evolve towards a European educational space in which countries perform towards strictly agreed benchmarks and indicators.

‘The purpose of this report is to provide data and research findings to underpin this policy co-operation at European level. The core of the report consists of an analysis of the progress made towards the common objectives agreed by the Council as the basis for this cooperation.’
(European Commission, 2011, p.3)

The annual report sets out which countries achieve the best performances and they are meant to act as inspirations for improvement for other countries. But as many countries do not achieve in progressing towards the benchmark, the report also aims to pin down on existing problems and to encourage dialogue and exchange of good practices between the member states. The overall aim of this report is to provide an empirical evidence base for policy making. As mutual learning is a core aspect of the Open Method of Co-ordination, the report lists the three best performing countries per core benchmark, and where possible, comparisons are made with the United States and Japan.

Survey instruments measuring specific adult learning indicators

Monitoring of the ‘adult learning participation’ benchmark is done based on the Labour Force Survey, a European quarterly household survey exploring employment issues across Europe, coordinated by Eurostat and conducted with people age 15 and over, regardless their main activity as anyone can be included in this survey (Boeren & Nicaise, 2012). Questions are asked about employment, but also about participation in learning activities. The benchmark of 15 percent of participation in adult learning to be achieved by 2020 is calculated based on data gathered in the Labour Force Survey.

Another survey, the Adult Education Survey, also coordinated by Eurostat was set up to increase in-depth knowledge about adult education as the Labour Force Survey just asked questions relating to participation in adult learning activities as one of their questions – both formal (organised and certified) and non-formal (organised but not certified), as the adult lifelong learning index consists of participation in these types of adult education and this statistic represents the number of activities one has taken part in, not the level, field or intensity of the participation (Eurostat, 2007). The Adult Education Survey's core business is participation in adult learning, making it the first European comparative survey with individual adults within the field. Therefore, it is seen as an important instrument to inform policy makers on the current state of affairs on adult education issues within their countries.

The first Adult Education Survey was conducted in 2005-2008 (reference year 2007) and was repeated in 2012. It is the intention to repeat the survey every 5 years. Task Force Groups are held to develop questionnaires and country level meetings are organised with specialists in the field to translate the common codebook into national questionnaires. One of the main differences between the Labour Force Survey and the Adult Education Survey related to participation in learning activities is the reference period. The benchmark of 15 percent is based on a four weeks period while the Adult Education Survey uses a reference period of 12 months. In this paper, I focus on the Eurostat Adult Education Survey as it was especially designed for analysing adult learning, while adult learning just emerges as one of the themes in the Labour Force Survey. Further in-depth description of the Eurostat Adult Education can be found below.

EUROSTAT ADULT EDUCATION SURVEY

Eurostat

Eurostat is the European Commission's statistical office founded in 1953 (Eurostat, 2012). Eurostat provides statistical data to the institutions of the European Union and strives towards harmonisation of data across the Member States, the EFTA countries and EU candidate countries. Eurostat coordinates common methodologies with statistical offices in the Member States in order to create comparable data across Europe. Eurostat's main interest lies in the processing of data around core European policy themes. The 'strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training' – ET 2020 – is one of these main interests, resulting in the gathering of data on education and training, including adult education.

Eurostat coordinates the 'European Union statistical information system on education and learning' (ESIS/EL). This ESIS/EL is built around three major pillars: (1) the collection of administrative data on education and training systems in cooperation with the UNESCO Institute for Statistics and the OECD, (2) the collection of data on enterprises specialising in vocational education and training by means of the Continuing Vocational Training Survey (CVTS) and (3) household surveys measuring participation of adults in education and learning collected at an individual level: Adult Education Survey (AES), Labour Force Survey (LFS) and Survey on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) (Eurostat, 2007).

Policy aims of the Eurostat Adult Education Survey

The Eurostat Adult Education Survey (AES) was carried out between 2005 and 2008 in most of the EU member states (not in Ireland and Luxembourg), in Norway and Switzerland and in Croatia and

Turkey, two EU Candidate Member States (Eurostat, 2010). The survey uses the reference year '2007' and was the first Adult Education Survey coordinated at the European level. Because of the first round of the AES, it is often referred to as the 'pilot' AES. A new round of the AES is currently on its way, but new data are not available yet for researchers. It is Europe's intention to carry out a new AES every five years, so it is important to provide input for the next rounds right now.

After 2000, the European Commission's interest in lifelong learning increased and the 2001 communication *'Making a European Area of lifelong learning a reality'* stressed four core objectives of lifelong learning: (1) personal fulfilment, (2) active citizenship, (3) social inclusion and (4) employability/adaptability, which were used as core themes around which the Eurostat Adult Education Survey would be built (European Commission, 2001). In general, Europe's current education policy is criticised for too strongly focussing on the last objective only (Holford & Mohorcic-Spolar, 2012). The importance of monitoring lifelong learning participation and the importance of designing surveys on lifelong learning is expressed by the European Commission as follows:

'Comparable information and statistical measures are essential to the development and implementation of coherent and comprehensive lifelong learning strategies. Statistics and indicators already form an essential part of existing initiatives in the field of lifelong learning with a view to monitor progress both in achieving identified targets and in implementing policy objectives.' (European Commission, 2011, p.7)

Preparations for the Adult Education Survey started in June 2003 with a Task Force whose main purpose was to define a policy framework setting out the information needs around adult learning, putting the learners themselves at the centre of the learning process (Eurostat, 2007). At that time, six specific Adult Education policy indicators were identified: (1) valuing learning, (2) information, guidance and counselling, (3) investing time and money in learning, (4) bringing learning and learners closer together, (5) basic skills and (6) innovative pedagogy. Based on this first document, the Task Force made list of 'lifelong learning indicators' which functioned as input for designing the core variables in the questionnaire.

Core questionnaire

The core questionnaire of the Adult Education Survey was designed by Eurostat, but national teams had to translate the core list into a national survey themselves. In order to strive towards common methodologies between various Eurostat surveys, certain questions are identical of questions in the Labour Force Survey.

The questionnaire consists of 11 rubrics:

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1. Information on the household | 6. Access to information about learning possibilities |
| 2. Information on the individual | 7. Use of ICT |
| 3. Participation in education and training | 8. Language skills |
| 4. Obstacles in participation in education | 9. Cultural participation |
| 5. Informal learning | 10. Social participation |
| | 11. Attitude towards learning |

Questions on participation in education and training include both formal and non-formal education, a separate rubric is on informal learning. Formal education is reported by ISCED (International Standard Classification of Education) level and non-formal education is divided between (1) private lessons or courses, (2) courses conducting through open and distance education, (3) seminars or workshops and (4) guided on the job training. Informal learning deals with (1) by learning from a family member, friend or colleague, (2) by using printed material, (3) by using computers, (4) through television/radio/video, (5) by guided tours of museums, historical/natural/industrial sites and (6) by visiting learning centres.

Survey methodology

Although the AES starts from one core questionnaire, survey methodologies between countries differed (Eurostat, 2010). The population for the AES were all adults aged 25 to 64, living in private households and who were permanent residents in the country in which the survey was conducted. Regarding sampling, simple stratified sampling was used in Latvia and Slovakia. Stratified random sampling – mainly based on age, sex, region and degree of urbanisation – was used in Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Sweden and the United Kingdom. Multi-stage stratified sampling – sampling households first, individuals adults second – was done in Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Latvia, The Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Slovenia and Spain.

Differences also consisted at the level of the data collection method. PAPI (Paper And Pencil Interviewing) was used in Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Spain. CATI (Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing) combined with CAPI (Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing) was used in Norway, Slovakia, Slovenia and Sweden. CAPI combined with PAPI was used in The Netherlands, while PAPI combined with web survey was used in Belgium. CAPI only was used in Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, Greece, Germany and the United Kingdom. It might have been the case that these survey methodologies have influenced the response rates as e.g. a country like Belgium has a rather low response rate of around 30 percent, which might be the result of choosing for a web survey.

USABILITY OF THE AES FOR POLICY DEVELOPMENT

This section looks at the usability of the Eurostat Adult Education Survey in using the data as input for national and European policy making. Different than the Labour Force Survey – on which the official 15 percent benchmark is based – the AES is a specialist adult learning survey and is therefore rather unique.

‘Adult Education Survey provides valuable information on the different types of learning that is intended to be used for the further implementation of national and European policies in this field. The first implementation of the survey highlighted the importance of the AES data, as most of the information provided is not available in other sources.’

(European Commission, 2010, p.36)

Although the policy of benchmarks and indicators is largely focussing on ‘monitoring’, it is also needed to understand which factors stimulate or constrain participation, in other words, to ‘analyse’ what causes participation. Apart from producing descriptive statistics, it is thus important to conduct secondary data analyses on these datasets in which factors can be related with each other. This is

important for policy makers in order to get some deeper understanding about the explanations underpinning the descriptive monitoring results.

‘The European framework of indicators that already exist and the development work currently being done permits not only to measure progress and performance of individual countries but also EU average performance levels in benchmark areas. The system provides also a basis for secondary analysis that provides essential new insight into dimensions of learning and learning processes. Such a system and such new insights are essential means of support for cooperation between countries in Europe within the frame of the open method of coordination.’
(Bjerkestrand, 2010, p.12)

Whether the Adult Education Survey is usable for providing this level of understanding for policy makers depends on the content of the questions which are being asked. Participation in adult learning is a complex issue and consists of interactions between various players and understanding what causes participation needs simultaneous investigation of these players (see Boeren, 2011).

In order to understand the concept of participation better, an extensive literature review on participation in adult/lifelong learning was conducted from the perspective of various disciplines including sociology, psychology, economics and policy studies – as part of my doctoral research. Based on this exercise, we concluded that many of the so-called participation models originate in social psychology, but fail to include information around the wider learning environment such as the existence of educational supply in the neighbourhood of the adult and the current offer of adult education courses, their flexible learning opportunities and enrolment fees, which can all be seen as institutional barriers preventing adults to take part (Boshier, 1973; Rubenson, 1977; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1980; Cross, 1981; Darkenwald & Merriam, 1982; Cookson, 1986; Baert et al., 2006).

Based on these observations, we developed the Comprehensive Lifelong Learning Participation Model – hereafter CLLPM (see Boeren et al., 2010). The CLLPM is inspired on the principle of ‘Bounded Agency’ and explains that participation is the results of an underlying decision-making process which incorporates various key agents (Rubenson & Desjardins, 2009; Boeren, 2011). The two main agents are the ‘potential’ adult learner and the ‘educational supplier’ who should come to a successful match on the educational market before participation can take place. Both key agents are shaped by specific characteristics and emerge in interaction by significant others: e.g. family or friends in the case of the ‘potential’ adult learner, other educational providers or National Qualification Frameworks in the case of educational institutions. Both the individual and the educational institution are embedded in a larger societal context with specific education policies, labour market characteristics, social policy context etcetera. As stated above, it is known that these macro level characteristics matter relating to participation as clustering countries by participation rates shows clear similarities with clustering welfare state regimes (Rubenson & Desjardins, 2009).

Going back to the Adult Education Survey and its relevance for policy development, in general, the AES succeeds in measuring individual variables as pointed out in the CLLPM as it is absolutely possible to get a clear picture of the socio-economic, socio-demographic, socio-cultural and psychological profile of the adult learners’ population. We also get some background information on the role of the employer by means of his/her support or deterrent behaviour. These variables make it possible for researchers to provide a good sociological and psychological profile of adult learners, potential adult learners and those not interested in becoming an adult learner at all.

All this information is helpful for policy makers to compare the social composition of their adult learning population with that of other countries and to adjust their national policies towards stronger inclusion of socially disadvantaged groups. This exercise starts from an ‘equity perspective’ of

dealing with benchmarks and indicators in which the main aim is to control whether there is a ‘fair’ distribution among participants in the population (Scheerens & Hendriks, 2004).

The difficulty in understanding participation in adult learning based on these types of surveys is the lack of insight in the organisational levels. While adult learners are asked several questions about the organisational aspects of their programme – such as enrolment fees and volume of instruction hours – it is hard to know how (the lack of) educational supply has played a role in the non-participation of other adults. Within the section on barriers, one item measures the non-availability of training opportunities in the surroundings of the adult, but still this is in fact the perception of the adult him/herself and does not necessarily have to match with the availability of offers. Therefore, if policy makers really want to understand what caused the low (or high) participation rate within their country, it is necessary to collect more data on educational systems or to triangulate the data with other research methods providing stronger contextual information. Grek and Ozga (2008) refer to ‘the dream of data’ as useful tools for policy makers to adapt and adjust their national policies towards European and global agendas, but in reality, there is a lot of data fragmentation and messiness of data without them being integrated in a coherent framework. This aspect leads to the conclusion that the Eurostat Adult Education Survey is a valuable instrument to provide monitoring across countries and to analyse the social make-up of the adult learners’ population, but that it will not be possible to empirically testify an overall conceptual lifelong learning model incorporating a ‘bounded agency’ perspective, needed in order to understand participation.

Apart from the usability of the AES for policy development, there are pitfalls associated with conducting large scale comparative surveys. In the next section, I provide some more details on these pitfalls applied to the Adult Education Survey and explain why policy makers should be careful when relying on comparative data.

METHODOLOGICAL WEAKNESSES

Conceptual, linguistic and measurement inconsistencies are likely to be present in international surveys and sampling might be done differently across countries (Osborn, 2004). Because of these inconsistencies, it is important to reflect on the methodological rigour of the research design and to interpret the finding with caution. In 2010, Eurostat published a ‘Synthesis Quality Report Adult Education Survey’ in which it focused on accuracy of sampling, accessibility and clarity of the survey and the level of comparability and coherence (Eurostat, 2010). Reading through the report, it becomes clear that conceptual inconsistencies are largely present, questioning the validity of the measurement. An overview of the core points mentioned in this report is outlined below.

‘Most countries stressed the difficulty in distinguishing among the concepts of formal, non-formal and informal learning, the difficulty in understanding the concept of the guided on-the-job training as well as problems in defining certain types of education activities such as astrology, yoga, tango (dance) etc.’

(European Commission, 2010, p.20)

What does formal, non-formal and informal actually mean? What criteria do specific country teams use to translate these umbrella terms into concrete questions relevant for their country, without losing the overall meaning of the concept, needed in order to protect the comparability. Research by Holford and Mleczko (2011) – based on the questionnaires of the Labour Force Survey – that countries who construct very inclusive and concrete questions around these forms of learning score higher on the

adult learning participation index. Other researchers have criticised the comparability of international surveys (e.g. Robinson, 1999; Blum et al., 2001; Bonnet, 2010).

This issue around concepts relates to linguistic and measurement problems. Do translations of core terms still mean the same before and after translation and does non-equivalence imply we are measuring different concepts, even if we use the same measurement level? Apart from linguistic factors, cultural factors can lead to non-equivalence as well, and how well aware are policy makers in e.g. Eastern European countries of the cultural practices in Western European countries in order to contextualise their performances? All these aspects might query the usefulness of data monitoring as input for policy-making.

In concrete terms, what is meant by terms like formal education? The AES codebook asks to translate 'During the last 12 months, that is since <<month, year>> have you been a student or apprentice in formal education (full time/part time) >>?' As Holford and Mleczko (2011) argued, countries deal differently with these types of translations, which the likelihood that this is going to affect the outcomes.

Other problems than validity problems in the AES relate to the reliability of the data. Results are reliable if one would get similar results if the same questionnaire was conducted at another moment (Robson, 2011). The AES quality report makes some reflections on this issue and identifies some concerns.

'The main weakness of the AES is the long questionnaire. Many countries consider that there are too many variables included in the questionnaire that result in high response burden. In addition, some of the survey concepts are confusing and thus, there is the need for better definitions and detailed guidelines on the survey variables. Also, some questions could be reformed and more categories could be added in order to avoid misunderstanding and item non-response.'

(European Commission, 2010, p.36)

The rather long questionnaire, together with the long reference period for the participation learning activities which was set at 12 months (instead of 4 weeks as in the Labour Force Survey) might have an impact on the loss of accuracy as respondents need to go back far in time as they have to answer questions about the intensity and costs of the course in which they participated – which might be difficult to remember in the case of short courses in the beginning of the reference period. The length of the questionnaire might lead to loss of attention in answering the questionnaire which raises questions around the reliability.

Differences in sampling strategies – e.g. at random versus stratified – also raises questions whether results are comparable and whether good weighting variables are included in order to obtain representatives samples across European countries, e.g. as some countries had stratified their sampling towards socio-demographic and socio-economic characteristics such as age, gender, living in a rural or urban area etc.. Belgium and the United Kingdom had most difficulties in reaching respondents as their response rates are lower than 50 percent. These differences in population might make it difficult to provide adequate explanations answering why variations across countries exist and which remedies should be implemented into national policies. Also the use of proxy interviews in some countries (Greece, Italy, The Netherlands, Poland and Slovenia) raise questions whether responses are accurate.

Apart from these conceptual and sampling problems, it is noted that there is not a 100 percent conceptual and methodological overlap with the Labour Force Survey in measuring adult lifelong

participation, although the LFS remains the main instrument for monitoring. The Labour Force Survey has a shorter reference period (four weeks) and the coverage of non-formal activities is broader in the Adult Education Survey. The quality report on Adult Education Survey reports on differences in results between these two surveys, so it is essential for policy makers not to mix up the results to develop their policies, but to take the contextual information into account before drawing conclusions. In fact, comparison of the results of these two surveys is not only difficult for policy makers who want to engage in evidence based policy making, but also for researchers who want to conduct secondary data analysis using a variety of secondary datasets such as the Labour Force Survey and the Adult Education Survey. One way of increasing the validity of these measurement instruments is to keep on working on making the goals and objectives of these surveys clear to all participating countries, and to make sure that these goals are defined and operationalized in a high quality way.

CONCLUSIONS

Having engaged in a discussion relating to the strengths and weaknesses in using the Eurostat Adult Education Survey as a tool for evidence based policy making, final conclusions will be provided.

Nowadays, there is a consensus that policy making should be evidence based (Goldstein, 2008). The soft law on monitoring towards benchmarks and indicators wishes to contribute to the instrumental effectiveness by providing information to policy makers with the aim to adapt policy towards the desired goals (Scheerens & Hendriks, 2004). Providing information across countries is able to set up dialogues between policy makers and stakeholders in the field, and to give them a reference point in where they are in developing the education and training system in their own country.

This paper looked at the usability and pitfalls for policy making based on the results of the Eurostat Adult Education Survey. Relying on a 'bounded agency' approach, the AES is not able to answer what 'causes' participation, although the social make-up of the adult learning population across Europe can be assessed. More in-depth information on adult learning systems across Europe is needed and data linkage might help creating a stronger empirical testing of participation issues.

'Again policy-makers will benefit from data which monitors important trends, but beyond the numbers and graphics lie issues about the nature and effectiveness of provision and the need for more and better data, sensitive enough to inform decision-making in these areas.'
(European Commission, 2000)

Another limitation of focussing policy making on surveys is the fact that participation is measured as a dichotomous 0-1 coded variable, which contradicts the conceptual understanding of what lifelong learning participation is about (Bagnall, 1989). As pointed out before, participation is a complex issue and the result of an underlying decision-making process, but participation itself remains a process as well. After enrolment, adult learners can go on and finish the course successfully, while others will drop out. The benchmark on participation in adult learning is formulated because Europe wants to become 'the most competitive knowledge society', but what are the exact outcomes of learning and how can we prevent enrolment in education and training without successfully finishing, especially in publicly funded provisions, where initial investments do not get returned to society? Questions can be raised whether policy development should rely on quantitative benchmarks and indicators or whether qualitative assessment is needed as well. The most achievable option is probably a triangulation of

research methods in which benchmarking gets cumulated with secondary data analysis and qualitative exploration of lifelong learning issues.

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